United Nations A/70/359–S/2015/684

General Assembly
Security Council

Distr.: General
1 September 2015

Original: English

General Assembly
Seventieth session
Item 39 of the provisional agenda*
The situation in Afghanistan

Security Council
Seventieth year

The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 68/11 and Security Council resolution 2210 (2015), in which I was requested to report every three months on developments in Afghanistan.

2. The report provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Afghanistan, including significant humanitarian, development and human rights efforts, since the issuance of my previous report of 10 June 2015 (A/69/929-S/2015/422). It also provides a summary of key political and security developments and regional and international events related to Afghanistan.

II. Relevant developments

3. During the reporting period, positive developments supportive of a possible peace and reconciliation process, notably, the holding of direct talks between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, ultimately gave way to increased uncertainty following the announcement of the death of the Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar. The Special Electoral Reform Commission commenced its work and presented an initial package of recommendations to President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, while additional efforts were undertaken by the Government to further develop its economic reform agenda and finalize senior appointments. Afghanistan continues, however, to face intersecting challenges across the political, security and socioeconomic sectors that pose threats to the population and the country's social cohesion. The sustained conflict, which grew in both intensity and geographic scope, continued to result in significant casualties and displacement among Afghan civilians, as the Afghan National Security Forces sought to counter the efforts of insurgent groups to undermine the Government.

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A. Political developments

4. In a positive development in support of peace, representatives of the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban held their first official, direct talks, in Murree, Pakistan on 7 July, facilitated by the Government of Pakistan. China and the United States of America attended the meeting as observers. The delegations from the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban discussed issues pertaining to peace and reconciliation and pledged to meet again as part of a continuing process. The meeting in Murree followed a series of informal meetings between various Afghan officials and Taliban representatives in other countries throughout May and June. The Murree talks were widely welcomed, although reaction among some Afghan political stakeholders was more guarded, with concerns expressed over the intentions of the Taliban delegates and their capacity to represent the entire movement. A subsequent statement issued by the Taliban on 15 June, in the name of Mullah Omar, stressed that "political endeavours and peaceful pathways" were legitimate under Islam and was perceived at the time as a softening of the movement's position on a peace process.

5. However, on 29 July, the Government of Afghanistan publicly proclaimed that the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, had died in April 2013, in Pakistan. The next day, a Taliban representative confirmed Omar's death "as a result of an illness", but without providing further details, and announced Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, Omar's deputy since 2010, as his successor. Sirajuddin Haqqani, the son of the founder of the Haqqani Network, Jalaluddin Haqqani, was announced as Mansoor's deputy along with the Taliban's former Chief Justice, Haibatullah Akhunzada. As a result of these events, a second meeting between Government and Taliban emissaries, scheduled for 31 July in Pakistan, was postponed and has yet to be rescheduled. In his first public message as the new Taliban leader, Mullah Mansoor released a statement on 1 August calling for Taliban unity and continued jihad, while characterizing reports of a peace process as enemy propaganda.

6. Following the announcement of Mullah Omar's death, rifts within the Taliban leadership emerged, with opposition to the appointment of Mullah Mansoor evident from a number of prominent Taliban figures, notably including relatives of Mullah Omar and Sayed Tayyeb Agha, the head of the Taliban Political Commission in Qatar, who subsequently resigned his position in apparent protest. This opposition notwithstanding, a significant number of Taliban members pledged their allegiance to Mullah Mansoor as leader of the Taliban and on 13 August, the leader of Al-Qaida, Ayman al-Zawahiri, did so as well.

7. Since my previous report, the Government has appointed two more senior officials. On 8 July, the lower house of the National Assembly confirmed a new Governor of the Central Bank and one of two nominees for the Supreme Court. The confirmed nominee, Sayed Yusuf Halim, was sworn in as Chief Justice on 27 July. The second Supreme Court candidate and first woman nominee for a seat on the Supreme Court was rejected. On 4 July, the lower house of the National Assembly also rejected the Government's nominee for Minister of Defence, Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai. The latter was appointed as acting Minister on 23 May and has continued to operate in that capacity. Other key positions that remain to be filled and require confirmation by the lower house include the Attorney General and two Supreme Court judges. The National Assembly rose for summer recess on 22 July and will reconvene on 6 September. An additional 11 provincial governors were

appointed during the reporting period, for a total of 23 out of 34 provincial governor appointments in 2015, including two women.

8. On 19 June, the Office of the President announced that the lower house of the National Assembly would continue its work until the next parliamentary elections. The term of the lower house was otherwise set to expire on 22 June, in accordance with the Constitution. In meetings with President Ghani, the Independent Election Commission suggested two possible dates for holding lower house and district council elections, in May or September 2016, but no announcement has yet been made. With no clear election date set, and following the scaling down of international donor funding for the Afghan electoral management bodies as detailed in my previous report, the Independent Election Commission reduced staff from 911 to 504 and secured funding through the Ministry of Finance to maintain core capacities. Possible changes in staffing and funding for the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission are being considered by the Government.

9. Some progress has been made on the issue of electoral reform as agreed between President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah in the 21 September agreement to form a National Unity Government. After the President and the Chief Executive reached agreement on its composition, chairmanship and operational modalities, a Special Electoral Reform Commission was re-established by presidential decree on 16 July. The Commission is composed of 14 members and has a three-month, renewable mandate to make recommendations to the Government on electoral reform. My Deputy Special Representative, Tadamichi Yamamoto, represents the United Nations as a non-voting member of the Commission, sitting in an advisory capacity.

10. On 30 August, the Special Electoral Reform Commission presented its initial package of recommendations to Chief Executive Abdullah, focusing on reforms for the next elections. After intensive, five-week deliberations, the Commission recommended changes to Afghanistan's electoral system and electoral management bodies, in addition to the invalidation of all existing voter registration cards and the creation of a country-wide voters list. During the course of its work, the Commission has undertaken a broad consultation process both in Kabul and key provincial capitals, meeting with a wide range of stakeholders, including political parties, prominent political figures, provincial authorities, civil society, religious leaders and international organizations working on electoral issues in Afghanistan. The United Nations has provided expert advice to the Commission, based on international best practices, and has facilitated some of the Commission's external consultations, including its provincial visits.

11. In accordance with President Ghani's instruction to the Cabinet on 23 April, all ministries and executive branch bodies presented 100-day strategies during the reporting period, with the exception of the Ministry of Defence. Collectively, the strategies reflect the Government's reform agenda, with many presented publicly in order to demonstrate the Government's commitment to transparency and accountability. On 28 June, the President's Special Representative on reforms and good governance, Ahmad Zia Massoud, presented his report on proposed administrative reforms and offered recommendations to promote capacity-building in the areas of anti-corruption, political participation and the civil service.

12. Nevertheless, nearly a year after its establishment, the National Unity Government faces considerable domestic political pressure, exacerbated by the

difficult security and economic situation. Critics of the current administration have included former President Hamid Karzai, several of his associates and a number of mujahideen leaders, all of whom have expressed their disagreement with President Ghani's outreach to Pakistan, specifically a memorandum of understanding reportedly concluded in May between the Afghan National Directorate of Security and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence. On 14 July, President Ghani met with the former President to explore grounds for future cooperation.

13. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) launched four initiatives focused on promoting inclusive Afghan-owned and -led dialogue in Baghlan, Bamyan, Daykundi and Kunduz Provinces. The initiatives were focused on engagement with local *ulema* and resulted in recommendations to support the latter's role in local mediation efforts and conflict resolution mechanisms to address drivers of conflict. *Ulema* involved in each of the initiatives called upon the Government to strengthen linkages between local and national level reconciliation efforts. On 15 July, participants in the Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace, a civil society initiative supported by UNAMA, welcomed the dialogue between Government officials and representatives of the Taliban and called for a cessation in hostilities and practical steps to reduce the impact of the conflict on civilians. They also asked the parties to consider the needs of the people, including women and young people, in any negotiations.

B. Security

14. Incident levels remained relatively consistent throughout the period, although the overall numbers show a 4.6 per cent decrease compared with the same period in 2014. However, the sustained conflict grew in both intensity and geographic scope. There was furthermore a noticeable spike in high-profile incidents in Kabul following the confirmation of the death of Mullah Omar and reports of internecine fighting among anti-Government elements in several areas.

15. The United Nations continued to monitor security-related events relevant to the work, mobility and safety of civilian actors and having the potential to affect the delivery of mandated activities and programmes. Between 1 May and 31 July, the United Nations recorded 6,096 security-related incidents across the country. This represented a 4.6 per cent decrease compared with the same period in 2014, which included the second round of the presidential election, while being consistent with the records for the same period in 2013. Geographically, the spread of the conflict has focused largely in the north-eastern regions around Kunduz, Badakhshan and Badghis Provinces, in the north-west towards Faryab Province, in the south-east region of Nangarhar Province and in the south, including Hilmand Province. The majority of incidents were reported in the southern and eastern parts of the country, with the provinces of Kandahar, Nangarhar, Ghazni, Hilmand and Kunar accounting for 44.5 per cent of all security incidents during the reporting period. During the Ramadan period and subsequent Eid al-Fitr festivities, the number of security incidents was the second highest on record for the holy month since 2003, reflecting the absence of any significant reduction in violence, as had occurred in previous years, despite calls by Afghan religious and political leaders and the United Nations to anti-Government elements for a cessation of violence.

16. The reporting period was notable for the concerted effort expended by anti-Government elements to capture and hold district centres in a number of provinces. These efforts resulted in the capture of seven district centres, a significantly larger number than in previous years, and of which five were subsequently recaptured by the Afghan National Security Forces. However, several of the centres captured by anti-Government elements were under their control for extended periods of time, allowing them to claim significant propaganda and materiel gains. The Afghan security forces mounted a series of counter-offensives and clearance operations throughout contested areas during the reporting period. This included a large-scale operation in Nangarhar in May that appears to have contributed to a lower level of incidents around Jalalabad City, as well as additional operations targeting key districts in the province during August. Further operations also took place in Hilmand, Ghor and Faryab during the period. While Afghan security forces retained control in the overwhelming majority of district centres across the country, anti-Government elements and other illegally armed groups continued to intimidate the population in many rural areas.

17. Although these attacks indicate the intent of the anti-Government elements to make territorial gains, particularly in more isolated rural areas, the capability of the Afghan security forces has largely prevented the consolidation of any significant gains and no provincial capitals have fallen to the insurgents. However, the Afghan security forces continue to face challenges, including reinforcing or resupplying units in remote areas. Concerns about the ability of the Afghan security forces to counter anti-Government elements led to calls for the establishment of pro-Government militia groups, or so-called local defence forces, particularly by former mujahideen leaders. UNAMA has registered a significant increase in such reports since May; in the reports it is indicated that pro-Government militia groups are being established or reinforced in the northern, western and southern regions.

18. Overall, incident trends remained unchanged, with armed clashes accounting for the majority of security incidents (53 per cent), followed by improvised explosive devices (26 per cent). Attempts by anti-Government elements to exert influence through fear and intimidation resulted in a continued high level of targeted killings. In the reporting period of 1 May to 31 July, 291 assassinations and attempted assassinations were recorded, an 11.4 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2014. Anti-Government elements also continued to undertake high-profile attacks in the country's capital and in provincial capitals. Although they ostensibly targeted the Government and international forces, the brunt of the attacks continued to be borne by civilians. Significant attacks in the first part of the reporting period included one on the National Assembly on 22 June and attacks on international military convoys in Kabul on 30 June, 7 July and 22 August, as well as suicide attacks on Afghan military and Government targets in the provincial capitals of Kandahar (25 May), Jalalabad (31 May), Lashkar Gah (30 June) and Khost (12 July). Following the announcement of the death of Mullah Omar, the city of Kabul experienced a string of attacks between 7 and 10 August, including suicide attacks in the vicinity of an Afghan National Army base, the police academy, an international military base and Kabul International Airport, which resulted in over 55 individuals killed and over 330 injured.

19. The period witnessed a significant increase in reports of intra-insurgent violence between the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its affiliates with the Taliban. The most significant clashes were reported in Nangarhar Province,

where 48 incidents were reported during the period from May to July, resulting in significant casualties on both sides and displacement among the local population. The clashes were alleged to have centred around disputes about ideological authority as well as financial control of lucrative cross-border smuggling routes. Air strikes conducted by international forces were reported to have killed several senior local ISIL figures in the province. Similar clashes were also noted in Farah Province during May, albeit on a significantly lower scale. The majority of alleged ISIL-affiliated fighters appear to be drawn from disaffected former members of the Afghan Taliban, Tehrik-eTaliban Pakistan or groups previously associated with Al-Qaida, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The bitter confrontation between ISIL and its affiliate groups with the Taliban was evidenced in propaganda and violent retaliation directed at each other by the two parties during the reporting period.

20. During the reporting period, a total of 26 recorded security incidents were either directly or indirectly aimed against the United Nations. Most of the incidents were directed towards United Nations staff members and included criminal acts and intimidation. Additionally, two road missions were targeted in Balkh Province (2 May) and Paktya Province (13 July). Regretfully, in the latter instance, one officer from the Afghan Diplomatic Protection Service escorting the United Nations road mission was killed and three others were wounded when their vehicle was hit by a remote-controlled improvised explosive device. No casualties or damage to United Nations personnel or assets were reported.

C. Regional cooperation

21. The Government of Afghanistan continued its engagement with regional partners throughout the reporting period. Chief Executive Abdullah attended the High-level International Conference on the Implementation of the International Decade for Action, "Water for Life", 2005-2015, held in Dushanbe on 9 and 10 July, stressing that Afghanistan was ready for constructive collaboration on regional water issues. On the margins of the conference, he discussed security issues and economic connectivity in bilateral meetings, including with President Emomali Rahmon and Prime Minister Qohir Rasulzoda of Tajikistan and with the Secretary-General. On 14 July, President Ghani welcomed the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the E3/EU+3 as an opportunity to strengthen peace, stability and economic cooperation in the region. Afghanistan hosted two preparatory meetings for the sixth high-level ministerial meeting of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference for Afghanistan, to be held in Kabul on 4 September.

22. The reporting period saw evidence of efforts to strengthen ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as continued challenges to the bilateral relationship. In early June, a letter alleged to be from President Ghani to Pakistani authorities was leaked to the press, in which a number of demands with regard to Pakistan preventing Taliban operations and supporting a peace process were made. Additional tension was created by renewed security incidents along the border, many involving cross-border indirect fire, which prompted both countries to lodge official protests. The leaders of Afghanistan and Pakistan still continued to pursue constructive engagement, with particular regard to the peace process. Pakistan's emergence as a broker in formal talks between the Government of Afghanistan and

the Taliban facilitated improved relations during the month of July following the successful convening of talks in Murree. However, the above-mentioned deadly attacks in Kabul, which coincided with the emergence of a new Taliban leadership in early August, led President Ghani to express public criticism of Pakistan and to call for urgent action by Pakistan against the Taliban, in particular to prevent the use of its territory to prepare Taliban operations. Amidst growing negative sentiment towards Pakistan in Afghanistan, on 13 August, President Ghani dispatched a high-level delegation to Islamabad to discuss improved security cooperation with Pakistani counterparts. Pakistan condemned the attacks and offered condolences, emphasizing its commitment to joint efforts to tackle terrorism. It also sought the collaboration of the Government of Afghanistan to avoid public denunciations of Pakistan.

23. Central Asian States and the Russian Federation continued to express concern at the spread of violent extremism from Afghanistan. At a high-level conference on the theme "Security and Stability in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Region", held in Moscow on 4 June, participants expressed support for Afghanistan's efforts to establish a peaceful, stable and prosperous State. At the Heads of State Council meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization held in Ufa, Russian Federation, on 9 and 10 July, President Ghani called for enhanced regional cooperation to address collective security challenges, stressing that terrorists were using Afghan territory to destabilize the region. President Xi Jinping of China echoed President Ghani's plea, as Afghanistan's neighbours announced that they would strengthen their borders with the country.

24. Regional efforts to enhance North-South energy connectivity, which have an impact on Afghanistan, gained momentum after separate visits to Central Asia by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan in late May, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India in early July. The two leaders and their interlocutors committed to expediting regional energy projects. Prime Minister Modi and President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov of Turkmenistan pledged to accelerate the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline. Pakistan's Prime Minister, President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan and President Almazbek Atambayav of Kyrgyzstan also expressed a commitment to fast-track the Central Asia-South Asia CASA-1000 hydroelectricity project. On 7 August, the steering committee selected Turkmenistan's state gas company, Turkmengaz, as the leader of the consortium to implement and operate the pipeline project.

III. Human rights

25. On 5 August 2015, UNAMA issued the midyear report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict covering the period from 1 January to 30 June 2015. UNAMA documented 4,921 civilian casualties (1,592 deaths and 3,329 injured), a 1 per cent increase in total civilian casualties compared with the same period in 2014. The vast majority of civilian casualties (90 per cent) resulted from ground engagements, improvised explosive devices, complex and suicide attacks and targeted killings. Anti-Government elements remained responsible for the largest proportion of total civilian casualties, at 70 per cent, with pro-Government forces responsible for 16 per cent (Afghan security forces and pro-Government groups 15 per cent and international military forces 1 per cent), and 10 per cent could not be attributed to a specific party, mostly occurring from crossfire incidents in ground

engagements. Four per cent of civilian casualties were attributed to explosive remnants of war. Ground engagements followed by improvised explosive devices remained the leading causes of civilian casualties, despite 19 and 21 per cent reductions in civilian casualties respectively from each tactic compared with the same period in 2014. The 1 per cent increase in total civilian casualties was driven by a 78 per cent increase in civilian casualties from complex and suicide attacks and a 57 per cent increase in civilian casualties from targeted killings. It was noted in the report that, compared with the same period in 2014, there had been a 60 per cent increase in civilian casualties caused by pro-Government forces, totalling 796 civilian casualties (234 civilian deaths and 562 injured); the establishment and implementation of a national-level policy on civilian casualty mitigation and prevention was recommended. It was also recommended in the report that both anti-Government elements and pro-Government forces cease the use of schools, hospitals and clinics for military purposes. On 11 August, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission issued its annual report on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan for the solar year 1393 (20 March 2014 to 19 March 2015), which included trends and statistics on civilian casualties that were largely consistent with the UNAMA 2014 annual report on civilian casualties in armed conflict.

26. Between 1 May and 31 July 2015, UNAMA documented 2,985 civilian casualties (934 killed and 2,051 injured), reflecting a decrease of 13 per cent from the same period in 2014. The decrease during this period may stem from the fact that during the same period in 2014, UNAMA documented a sharp increase in civilian casualties linked to attacks on the electoral process, in particular during the second round of presidential elections held on 14 June 2014. During the current reporting period, 69 per cent of civilian casualties were attributed to anti-Government elements, 18 per cent to pro-Government forces (16 per cent to Afghan National Security Forces, 1 per cent to pro-Government militia and 1 per cent to international military forces) and 10 per cent to unattributed crossfire between pro-Government forces and anti-Government elements. Three per cent of civilian casualties, resulting mostly from explosive remnants of war, could not be attributed. Ground engagements continued to be the leading cause of civilian casualties, accounting for 985 civilian casualties (262 deaths and 723 injured), followed by improvised explosive devices.

27. UNAMA noted its concern about the continued suicide and complex attacks by the Taliban and other anti-Government elements in civilian-populated areas throughout the reporting period. On 25 May, the Taliban detonated a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device outside the Zabul Provincial Council building, wounding 79 civilians, including 30 women and 2 children. On 30 June, the Taliban conducted a complex attack targeting the Afghan National Police in Lashkar Gah city, Hilmand Province. The attackers killed 5 civilians and injured another 62. Three attacks on 7 August caused 355 civilian casualties (42 deaths and 313 injured), representing the highest number of civilians killed and injured in one day since UNAMA began systemically recording civilian casualties in 2009. In one of the attacks, a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device detonated in the Shah Shahid area of Kabul city, killing 15 civilians and injuring 283 others. The Taliban claimed responsibility for each of the aforementioned attacks, but issued a statement explicitly denying responsibility for the attack on the Shah Shahid area.

28. Between 1 May and 31 July 2015, the United Nations-led country task force on monitoring and reporting documented and verified 379 incidents resulting in 785

child casualties, including 220 children killed and 565 children injured. Ground engagements killed or injured at least 391 children; this was the leading cause of death, accounting for 49.8 per cent of all child casualties. Incidents involving improvised explosive devices used by anti-Government elements caused 180 child casualties (22.9 per cent). Overall, anti-Government elements were responsible for 365 (or 46.5 per cent) of all child casualties and pro-Government forces caused 203 casualties (26 per cent). In assessing the year to date, the number of documented child casualties has increased in 2015, with the number of casualties verified between 1 April and 30 June the highest recorded since the monitoring and reporting mechanism was established in Afghanistan in 2009. Further, there was a significant increase in attacks against schools and related personnel between 1 April and 30 June compared with the previous three months, increasing from 15 to 52 incidents, of which 40 were verified with 33 attributed to anti-Government elements. Reports of the recruitment of children by armed forces were received during this period, with five verified incidents, three of which were attributed to the Taliban and two to the Afghan security forces.

29. On 30 June, President Ghani launched Afghanistan's National Action Plan on Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women and Peace and Security for 2015-2022. The national action plan enshrines the Government's pledges for strategic interventions towards the increasing role of women in the areas of participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery, the four pillars of resolution 1325 (2000). The launch of the plan marked the culmination of a year-long consultative and technical process, supported by the United Nations, to create a framework that ensures the participation of women in the ongoing peace process at the national and subnational levels. On 16 June, the United Nations launched its HeforShe global campaign with a high-level event in Kabul under the slogan "A Brave Man Stands for Women". Male keynote speakers highlighted the need for men to support gender equality and the empowerment of women and noted that, despite the progress made since 2001, gender equality continues to be a major challenge. The Ministry of Women's Affairs launched its 100-day plan on 1 June, which included technical support from the United Nations. Key aspects of the plan include the launch of the National Strategy for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and the Women's Economic Security and Rights Strategy, as well as the revision of the indicators for the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (2008-2018).

30. Following the verdict and sentencing of the persons accused of complicity in the murder of a 27-year-old woman by a crowd in Kabul on 19 March, the prosecutor and all those convicted lodged appeals in the Kabul Appellate Court. On 30 June, the Appellate Court rendered its decision, upholding all verdicts, except the convictions of one civilian and two police officers. The Court also upheld all prison sentences, but substituted the death sentence imposed on four defendants with lengthy prison terms. Further appeals have been lodged by all parties with the Supreme Court.

31. In line with the National Action Plan on the Elimination of Torture, on 4 May, the Government of Afghanistan established an implementation working committee comprising senior members of relevant Government institutions, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and a representative of civil society. On 25 June, the National Directorate of Security issued an order reiterating the

prohibition of torture, in particular the use of torture during interrogation to obtain a confession.

IV. Implementation of the Kabul process and coordination of development assistance

32. The senior officials meeting, agreed at the London Conference and centred upon the Government's reform agenda, was held on 5 September in Kabul and hosted by the Government of Afghanistan. Earlier, at the 21 May meeting of the International Contact Group, participants agreed that the senior officials meeting should reaffirm the principles of the development partnership, including mutual accountability, and present a renewed mutual accountability framework incorporating the Government's reform agenda. Work on the renewed framework continued in parallel with other Government-led processes, including the preparation of a report on the progress of ongoing reforms, the consolidation of national priority programmes, public presentations of the 100-day plans of Executive Branch ministries and bodies and a technical review of the Government's approach to public financial management reform.

33. The Government continued implementing the economic reform measures that were agreed with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) through the staff-monitored programme on 2 June. The measures include structural benchmarks and measures designed to improve banking sector performance and domestic revenues. The Ministry of Finance is leading the measures to improve domestic revenue performance and reported collecting approximately $829 million in domestic revenue during the first six months of the fiscal year, representing an increase of 9.9 per cent over the previous year. President Ghani also reaffirmed the Central Bank's independence during the investiture ceremony of the Central Bank Governor on 13 July. Progress on the staff-monitored programme is expected to be assessed during the first review, which the Government and IMF have planned to conduct in the second half of the fiscal year.

34. During the reporting period, the Ministries of Finance and Economy and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, together with line ministries that operate sub-nationally, took further steps to implement the Government's reform agenda pledge to decentralize 40 per cent of the development budget. The institutions prepared draft policy recommendations to implement a more participatory and decentralized development planning and budgeting approach, which will be presented to the Cabinet for its deliberations. The Independent Directorate of Local Governance presented its 100-day plan on 27 June, which prioritized the delegation of authority and resources to the subnational level.

35. The Government continued efforts to promote the rule of law and address corruption. Following his appointment by President Ghani on 27 July, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court commenced work on a series of reforms. Initial discussions led by the Chief Justice centred on prioritizing reforms to enhance the transparency of court decisions and actions; strengthen anti-corruption measures; improve access to justice; increase training for judicial officers; and strengthen the independence of the judiciary. During the reporting period, the Attorney General's Office continued efforts to prosecute the persons involved in the collapse of the Kabul Bank. The Attorney General's Office announced the arrest of two members of

the Kabul Bank Clearance delegation on 25 June, measures to freeze assets and impose travel bans on an additional 155 individuals on 6 July and the arrest on 27 July of two Kabul Bank debtors at the airport who were attempting to leave the country. In June and August, the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee issued three "vulnerability to corruption" assessments covering the payment system for martyrs and persons disabled by conflict, investigation processes linked to the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law and the registration of official documents in the judicial system. From 1 to 5 June, a joint meeting was convened between anti-corruption experts of Afghanistan and two reviewing countries to conduct a mandatory review of Afghanistan's implementation of the United Nations Convention against Corruption.

36. During the reporting period, the Ministry of Interior established a General Directorate for International Cooperation, completing the transfer of the Secretariat of the International Police Coordination Board to the Ministry of Interior. This is an important step in the Government's efforts to ensure ownership of the institutional development of the police and the coordination of funds from international partners. Further, since the Ministry of Interior adopted police women councils as a national strategic approach on 9 December 2014, progress towards their establishment has continued, with 23 established during the reporting period. As at 20 August, there were 75 police women councils, 45 of which are in Ministry of Interior directorates and Kabul police districts, and 30 in the provinces.

37. On 30 June, the Ministry of Interior approved an 18-month extension of the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan with the United Nations Development Programme. Responding to policy guidance from President Ghani, the project will support capacity-building in the Ministry of Interior. The Trust Fund will channel approximately $843 million to the Ministry of Finance for the salaries of over 150,000 police and $38 million to provide capacity development and related support to broader security and justice reform.

V. Humanitarian assistance

38. The ongoing conflict between Government forces and insurgent and international terrorist-associated networks led to significant population displacements and increasingly affected civilians during the reporting period. The continued expansion of the conflict from the south and south-east to northern Afghanistan has created challenges for the provision of assistance by humanitarian actors, particularly given that many of those displaced by the conflict are located in areas rendered inaccessible to humanitarian agencies owing to ongoing hostilities.

39. Conflict-induced displacement continues to rise significantly in almost all regions, triggered by insurgent and international terrorist-associated networks and counteroffensives from the Afghan National Security Forces. As at 30 June 2015, the Task Force on Internally Displaced Persons reported 103,000 individuals as displaced by conflict during 2015. This represents a 77 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2014. The highest number of displaced (37,523 individuals) was recorded in Kunduz Province. Displacement was also triggered by clashes in eastern Afghanistan between the Taliban and other groups declaring their allegiance to ISIL. From 1 May to 30 June, the United Nations and its humanitarian partners assisted approximately 259,160 conflict-displaced persons with an estimated 3,634

metric tons of food assistance. The United Nations has commenced preparations to support persons displaced by the conflict during the winter period.

40. From 15 May to 31 July, 25 out of 34 provinces were affected by extreme weather, including flooding owing to snow melt, river bank erosion and heavy rains. A total of 19 people were reported killed and 13 injured, with 1,200 houses destroyed and 1,400 houses damaged. A total of 18,160 individuals were affected by these natural disaster incidents, including as many as 6,100 individuals displaced from their homes, and were assisted by the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority and humanitarian agencies. During the months of May and June 2015, the United Nations supported 16,135 people affected by natural disasters across the country with 425 metric tons of food.

41. Polio eradication efforts continued to face access challenges in southern and eastern Afghanistan, as well as in the south-eastern and western regions. From May to early August, the United Nations and relevant stakeholders met to secure the resumption of the vaccination campaign in Kandahar Province, where over 523,000 children under five years of age had been deprived of polio vaccinations. The vaccination campaign resumed in Kandahar Province on 23 August. Since the previous report, seven new cases of polio have been confirmed in Afghanistan, increasing the total for 2015 to eight cases. Five of the new cases were confirmed in the western provinces of Farah and Herat and are genetically linked with the polio virus strain endemic to Kandahar Province. Between 1 May and mid-August, two rounds of National Immunization Days and three rounds of subnational immunization days were held. The National Immunization Day campaigns are aimed at vaccinating approximately 9 million children.

42. Tripartite Commission meetings were held in Kabul on 21 August with Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and on 17 August with Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and UNHCR. At those meetings, the planning process for the voluntary, safe, dignified and gradual repatriation of Afghan refugees and the continued management of the refugee populations in Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran was continued. A group called the Friends of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees was formed in Kabul on 16 June, comprising donors, development stakeholders, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations and representatives of the Governments of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The country portfolio of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, consisting of a range of reintegration and development projects from multiple agencies, was recently revised. The country portfolio includes projects, activities and financial requirements for the implementation of the strategy. The High Commission on Migration, chaired by President Ghani, held its first meeting on 22 June. It was agreed that the Subcommittee of the Council of Ministers would be responsible for implementing policy decisions through relevant line ministries. UNAMA, UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) will provide support to the Commission's secretariat.

43. The number of undocumented Afghans spontaneously returned or deported from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan increased during the first six months of 2015. As recorded at border crossing points, 91,458 individuals from Pakistan returned to Afghanistan during the first six months of 2015, compared with 21,866 individuals during the same period in 2014. A total of 243,107 individuals

spontaneously returned or were deported from the Islamic Republic of Iran during the first half of 2015, compared with 220,564 during the same period in 2014. The returns from Pakistan represent a 418 per cent increase from the same period in 2014. Most of the Afghans returning from Pakistan have spent between 15 and 25 years outside of Afghanistan. The rate of return through UNHCR voluntary repatriation programmes increased significantly, with 43,695 individuals repatriating (mostly from Pakistan) between 1 January and 30 June 2015, compared with 9,364 individuals for the same period in 2014. Returnee monitoring feedback continues to raise concerns about allegations that Pakistan is pressuring refugees to return.

44. The United Nations and its partners continue to respond to the needs of 217,000 refugees from Pakistan who crossed into south-eastern Afghanistan following military operations in North Waziristan. No large-scale return of refugees is expected in 2015, as evidenced by the building of transitional shelters by refugees and from consultations with families who indicated that they expect to return in two to three years. Significant gaps remain in the response owing to limited funding, in particular for food items, and as a result, refugees are currently receiving about 30 per cent of the standard food rations.

45. From 1 January to 31 July, the volume of security incidents involving humanitarian-related personnel, assets and facilities and violations against health-care facilities decreased compared with the same period in 2014, with 140 recorded incidents. These included the killing of nine aid workers in Balkh Province on 2 June and the killing of five national and two international non-governmental organization workers in Kabul on 13 May. In addition, 28 aid workers were wounded and 90 abducted during the first seven months of 2015. On 2 July, a hospital in Kunduz supported by a non-governmental organization was temporarily closed after security forces raided the hospital and allegedly threatened medical staff while searching for a suspected insurgent who was reportedly being treated in the hospital.

46. As at 30 June, overall humanitarian funding reached $197 million according to the Financial Tracking Service, of which $124.3 million is designated for activities within the Humanitarian Response Plan and $72.7 million for other funding (for example, for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement). The 2015 Humanitarian Response Plan midyear review includes a revised funding requirement of $417 million, increased from $405 million, based on increased needs for refugees and returnees. In addition, the humanitarian cluster system is reprioritizing resources within its existing strategies to address the marked increase in the conflict-displaced persons caseload and most critical life-saving needs. In early July, the Emergency Response Coordinator allocated $8 million to Afghanistan under the Central Emergency Response Fund underfunded emergencies window. This funding is being prioritized to support assistance towards the immediate needs of newly displaced populations owing to conflict and underfunded needs from displacements in 2014.

VI. Counter-narcotics

47. The Ministry of Counter-Narcotics, in collaboration with the United Nations, launched the Afghanistan Drug Reporting System on 23 June. The Ministry of

Counter-Narcotics views the system as a key component of its leadership and coordination role in countering narcotics, given that it consolidates verified information from all line ministries and international partners involved in counter-narcotics-related initiatives. As such, the system will provide access to the most up-to-date data on all available narcotics-related indicators in Afghanistan, including eradication, cultivation, drug prices, treatment capacity, imprisonment, alternative livelihoods and seizure, to inform trend analysis, policy development and evaluation.

48. At the close of the annual opium cultivation period in 2015, a total of 3,760 hectares of opium poppy in 12 provinces had been verified as eradicated under the Governor-led control programme. This represents a 40 per cent increase from the 2,692 hectares verified as eradicated in 2014 under the initiative. Since May, two persons have been injured during eradication operations. Overall security incidents decreased compared with the eradication period in 2014, owing to better coordination efforts between the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics and the Ministries of Defence and Interior. Such efforts have allowed eradication to be carried out in the vicinity of military operations, which has resulted in less resistance being directed against eradication operations.

49. From 10 May to 12 August, Afghan law enforcement authorities conducted 735 counter-narcotics operations, resulting in the seizure of approximately 16,161 kg of narcotics, a reduction in seizures from the same period in 2014. This comprised 1,911 kg of heroin, 8,142 kg of opium, 6,104 kg of hashish and 4 kg of methamphetamine. In addition, 372 kg of solid precursor chemicals and 74 litres of liquid precursor chemicals were seized. The operations also resulted in the arrest of 777 suspects and the seizure of 149 vehicles and 59 weapons; this was not without incident, however, as two security force personnel were killed in the operations. Significant seizures continued to be recorded at Afghanistan's international airports, with law enforcement authorities reporting a total of 25 seizures involving 25 kg of narcotics in the overall total for the period.

VII. Mission support

50. UNAMA continued to review and align operational resources to enable mandated activities across the country. The preparations for the roll-out of the next phase of the Umoja enterprise resource planning project continued throughout the reporting period. Training and capacity-building activities for staff were undertaken as part of the preparations in close consultation with the Kuwait Joint Support Office.

VIII. Observations

51. During the past three months, the Government continued to make efforts to address the increasing political, economic and security challenges. I welcome the determination of the National Unity Government to improve accountability and eliminate corruption, which will be central to establishing fiscal sustainability and a long-term path towards equitable economic growth. Measures to implement the reform agenda articulated at the London Conference on Afghanistan have begun, with the Government reporting progress in efforts to reform revenue collections and

procurements, enhance anti-corruption measures, rationalize Government salaries and improve the investment climate. The Government is preparing reform and development plans aimed at supporting its objectives of self-reliance and growth, including a renewed mutual accountability framework that synthesizes key features of those plans focused on priorities leading to the next development ministerial conference. As the Government moves forward with its agenda, it will be important for the leadership to work with the private sector and civil society to ensure that the rights and needs of all its citizens, particularly the most vulnerable, are protected and addressed during this reform process. I welcome the recent senior officials meeting, which provided a platform for the Government and its international supporters to renew commitments to mutually agreed benchmarks and promote more effective use of aid.

52. The commencement of work by the Special Electoral Reform Commission was another critical step towards meeting the commitments made by President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah in September 2014 upon the formation of the Government and in further improving Afghanistan's electoral processes and public confidence. The Commission members are working intensively to address a number of electoral challenges in a spirit of collaboration.

53. A number of prominent Afghans, however, have publicly voiced their concern about the path being pursued by the Government. Political divisions within the Government and with other political powerbrokers continue to challenge the Government's capacity to make timely decisions and implement effective reforms. Nonetheless, I am encouraged to learn of efforts to move towards more constructive engagement in the interests of the nation. I urge all political leaders to rise above individual differences and confront these shared challenges in a spirit of national unity.

54. This constructive approach is essential given that the intensity of the conflict within the country shows no signs of abating and, if anything, the security environment has become more fragile and dynamic. Conflicts between anti-Government groups, including ISIL and the Taliban, and continued reports of leadership tensions within the Taliban movement present increased challenges in predicting conflict trends. At the same time, the conflict continues to expand in the northern provinces of the country and a series of attacks have taken place in Kabul. In this environment, the Afghan security forces have served with courage and resilience in the face of sustained pressure. Notwithstanding the challenges facing the Afghan security forces, I am concerned about increasing calls for and signs of the re-establishment and reinforcement of pro-Government militias to combat insecurity. While it is understandable that local communities are motivated to support the security forces, armed groups not directly accountable to the State represent a long-term challenge to security in the country. I urge the Government to maintain the focus of its efforts on building the capacity of its national security forces, which will serve and be accountable to all Afghans and enjoy their full support.

55. I am deeply concerned about the continuing impact of the conflict upon ordinary Afghans, following a period of sustained conflict throughout the holy month of Ramadan. The impact of insurgent attacks upon civilians, particularly in urban areas, continues to contradict public undertakings by anti-Government elements concerning the protection of civilians. Consistent with my statement on

14 July following a series of attacks in Khost, Baghlan and Kabul, there can be no justification for such abhorrent attacks in public places, where victims are predominantly civilians. The shocking attacks on 7 August in Kabul caused the highest casualties in that city in recent memory and understandably prompted considerable public anger.

56. The conflict also continues to undermine the efforts of humanitarian actors to deliver aid. It is imperative that all those affected by conflict have access to humanitarian assistance and that aid workers can work unimpeded, without fear of violent attack. I again remind all parties to the conflict that military operations must be conducted with respect for international human rights and humanitarian law and urge full compliance in this regard.

57. The simultaneous increase in both conflict-related internal displacement and refugee returns presents an increasing humanitarian and socioeconomic challenge. The efforts by the Government and its national and international partners to manage the processes of repatriation and reintegration and to meet the immediate humanitarian needs of the displaced are welcome. I encourage donors to ensure that funding gaps are filled and that assistance is available to those in need.

58. The announcement of the death of Mullah Omar has clear implications for reconciliation, as questions about Taliban cohesion following the announcement have also fuelled doubts about its commitment to a peace process. The postponement of the second round of talks was undoubtedly a setback, but peace processes rarely move in a linear way. I reiterate the need for the Taliban to choose the path to peace by nominating an authorized and representative delegation to resume direct talks with the Government. A peaceful political settlement achieved through dialogue is necessary for the future of Afghanistan.

59. A successful peace process needs to be inclusive. Discussions should take place at all strata of society and this public debate should guide and support negotiations between political leaders. Initiatives that stimulate discussion and promote inclusion, such as the Afghan People's Dialogue and the National Action Plan on Women and Peace and Security, are crucial. I welcome President Ghani's pledge, made at the launch of the Plan, to ensure women's participation in the peace process and to fully implement the Plan's provisions.

60. The Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan continued to engage on critical issues and while there were challenges to this relationship during the reporting period, there are indications that both nations are making efforts to rebuild trust. The Murree talks on 7 July were a positive step in both neighbourly relations and an Afghan peace process, with Pakistan playing a constructive supporting role as host. This event illustrated the progress that can be made through positive, regional engagement. However, subsequent developments have strained the bilateral relationship and risk undermining the effective regional partnership being fostered between the nations. Faced with growing domestic discontent in Afghanistan following the attacks of 7 August in Kabul, the visit by senior Afghan officials to Islamabad on 13 August underscored the need for a shared commitment to continue to work together as equal partners in addressing security challenges. I urge the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan to redouble their efforts to find common ground on issues of security coordination and further explore how best to support an Afghan-led and -managed peace process.

61. In reference to the request by the Security Council that I conduct an examination of the role, structure and activities of all United Nations entities in Afghanistan, I am pleased to report the timely completion of the work of a tripartite commission comprised of representatives of the Government, the international donor community, and UNAMA and United Nations agencies, funds and programmes. This process was a useful opportunity for all stakeholders to take stock and highlight important aspects of how the United Nations works in Afghanistan, resulting in an improved alignment of work and structures. It is my expectation that the report and recommendations of the Commission will inform the Council's discussions in early 2016.

62. Lastly, I thank all the United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative, Nicholas Haysom, for their continued efforts, under challenging conditions, to support a more peaceful, prosperous and stable Afghanistan.